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MONTANA'S LAW SCHOOL LEADS IN UPDATING LEGAL EDUCATION

By Maribeth Dwyer
UM News and Publications

MISSOULA--

In the 1970s the University of Montana law school undertook a program review aimed at making a legal-education system designed in the 1870s fit the needs of students who would be practicing law in the 21st century.

No other law school in the country is engaged in exactly the same kind of long-range academic planning, and schools throughout the nation are watching the UM project closely.

The project has also attracted attention closer to home. On June 21, the State Bar of Montana presented a Distinguished Achievement Award to UM Law Dean John O. Mudd "in appreciation of outstanding service in the field of legal education and in recognition of efforts in establishing the Academic Planning Program at the University of Montana School of Law."

The dean considers the award more an endorsement of the project than a personal honor. "I happen to be the catalyst," he said, "but I think the award is more a recognition of the efforts of the faculty, who are doing the day-to-day work on the project."

The project got under way about six years ago with a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). To date, the project

(over)

law school--add one

has received over \$250,000 from FIPSE, the Montana Legislature and private donors.

The dean stresses that the project is ongoing and will continue to need infusions of funds if it is to reach its long-term goals.

Its primary goal is to integrate the traditional aspects of legal education with the new kinds of training needed by today's lawyers.

"One of the areas we're working on in this whole updating process is the evaluation of student performance, not just book learning," Mudd said.

"Students must acquire skills in business planning, writing, client relationships, group problem-solving, trial work, and the use of such technological tools as videotaping and computerized record-keeping in a law practice.

"No models exist for integrating such skills into the traditional educational program, so we are breaking new ground. The process requires changes in the structure of the curriculum and in staffing.

"For example, we now involve in our academic program 20 lawyers, six physicians and a dozen laypeople. They work with our students on client interviewing, use of expert witnesses, and other aspects of a clinical training program that provides practical experience in civil, criminal and administrative proceedings. We also use upperclass students as teaching assistants."

(more)

law school--add two

In addition to those working directly in the academic program, several hundred Montana lawyers participate in the project by answering questionnaires, commenting on specific proposals and providing case studies.

Mudd believes the law school is pioneering changes in legal education that will have particular application in states like Montana, which need "community" rather than "institutional" lawyers.

He said institutional lawyers are associated with diplomas from large law schools and tend to be specialists working for big corporations or government agencies. In contrast community lawyers in diversified practice need comprehensive professional skills to deal with the spectrum of human problems.

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